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Public Citizen

New York's outstanding young lawyer is a role model for older women

With all the attention she has been getting lately, you can't blame Ree Adler for feeling a little out of her element. There was the story in the New York Times. Another in the Wall Street Journal. The mention in Working Woman magazine. Film crews from local television and the cable Family Channel. An Associated Press story that went across the nation. A Buffalo News profile. A planned appearance on "Good Morning America."

It all runs a bit against the grain for Adler, a Class of 1983 graduate of UB Law School who has built a career as a \$1-a-year public-assistance lawyer for Buffalo's Neighborhood Legal Services. She's accustomed to working behind the scenes, pleading the case for her low-income clients with a persuasive telephone call or a convincing letter.

But a New York State Bar Association Award as this year's Outstanding Young Lawyer — an award that the media seem to find intriguing, given that Adler is 63 years old — has given her an ad hoc second calling: as a role model for a generation of women who thought they had missed their chance for a career.

Reading about and seeing Ree Adler has made some of them think again.

"I've gotten some really interesting phone calls," Adler says from her tiny, windowless office in Buffalo's Ellicott Square Building. "Older wom-



Ree Adler '83 at her office in Neighborhood Legal Services.

en — in New York, California, one from Boston the other day — who wanted to go to law school, but didn't have the courage."

They could do worse for a hero. Adler — long a volunteer in a panoply of arts and social services groups — made the jump into law school

when she was 52 years old. Even then, it was with some hesitancy. She made a deal with her husband, thoracic surgeon Richard H. Adler, that she would never study past 10:30 p.m., would reserve time for dinner with him every evening, and upon graduation would work full time as a public-

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service lawyer.

"If I were younger during law school, I would have been driven in a different way," she says. "I would have done Moot Court, things like that. Some feminists would consider doing less a betrayal, but that was what worked for me.

"I know law school is a nightmare for many people, but it was a wonderful experience for me. I was starved for that kind of intellectual stimulation.

"There were times of tremendous stress. Once a classmate said to me: 'I don't know why you're putting yourself through this. I have to, but you don't.' But I did have to do it. It was an unfulfilled part of me.

"And it was harder on a lot of other people than on me. I didn't have little kids at home like some of the students. I didn't have financial worries. I didn't have a part-time job."

Nonetheless, occasionally it was disconcerting to be rubbing elbows with classmates 30 years her junior.

"Sometimes a professor would say, 'Remember this — you're going to be using it for 40 years.' That would set me back.

"And there was one time when I was hanging around with a friend of mine, and I realized that her mother was younger than I was. That's my problem — I really don't know my age."

Adler mentions Virginia Leary and Elizabeth Mensch — "two professors whom I greatly admire" — as among those who had a profound influence on her training as a lawyer. She also cites Elizabeth Buckley, now an instructor at the Law School, as a person who "has really been a mentor and a friend to me."

She calls Buckley, an early colleague at Neighborhood Legal Services, "a very nurturing person who's very talented and knows how to teach.

She never made me feel stupid, even though many times I was."

If she was, she got over it quickly. Adler's tenure at Neighborhood Legal Services has resulted in some real nuts-and-bolts progress for those on the margins:

- * She helped to create the Every-woman Opportunity Center for Displaced Homemakers, the first organization of its kind in the state.

- * She formed a coalition to lobby the Buffalo Board of Education to start a Parent/Child Center, which provides child care for young mothers seeking to complete their high school education.

- * Another coalition she helped to organize — the Health Care Coalition, comprised of doctors, lawyers and community representatives — was influential in the state Legislature's recent passage of Do Not Resuscitate and Health Care Proxy laws.

- * She negotiated to ensure due process protections for Buffalonians facing shutoff of their water service for non-payment.

"I always talk to people about how important it is to negotiate," Adler says. "I love the challenge of negotiating and achieving an end without litigation."

Her volunteer status presented a challenge at first. She had to convince her colleagues that she could stick it out in the contentious world of public-interest law.

She did so by showing up every day, even the day an ice storm turned her short commute into a two-hour nightmare each way. "Someone was saying, 'I can't believe you're doing that for an unpaid job,'" she says. "But it's almost as if I feel a lot of guilt if I'm not here."

She has cut back to a four-day work week as her husband scales down his surgical practice. But the fighting spirit, the drive, remain her full-time legal weapons.

"I think law is a wonderful profession," Adler says. "I know there are people who abuse it, but it's the foundation of our lives."

Her self-effacement is legend. With eight years' seniority at Neighborhood Legal Services, for example, she could have claimed an office with a window, but "a window isn't that important to me. Better to let someone have it who really wants it." And of the state Bar Association award, for which she was eligible because she has been a lawyer for less than 10 years, she says: "There are a lot of people who graduated with me who are much more deserving than me, such as partners in firms."

At the same time, there is a well of stubborn independence at her core. It shows in something as simple as her first name. She never liked her given name, which was Rita, and so chose a new one and had it legally changed.

Ree Adler knows what all the reporters who have been besieging her know: that hers is a story with heart, one that resonates for others of her generation.

"I think the largest story behind this award," she says, "is all the women, all the minorities who didn't become what they could have become years ago. All the disenfranchised people.

"It's a great copout to say, 'Society kept me back,' but I don't think people understand the choices that we had to make. The choice for women coming out of college — in my case, Emerson College — was either to get married or go back to your parents' home.

"I didn't feel that law school was an option back then. And now, I don't know how far I could have gone had it been an option.

"Who knows what I missed? I'm just glad I've gotten some of it." ■